

Estonian Jews in the USSR. (1941-1945)

(Research Based on Survivors' Testimony)

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THE FATE OF ESTONIAN Jewry during the Holocaust* differed from that of the other Jewish communities in the Baltic countries. While tens of thousands of Jews from various European countries were concentrated and exterminated in occupied Estonia, the majority of the local Jewish community found refuge in the U.S.S.R. In fact, many Estonian Jews even fought against the Nazis, either in the ranks of the Red Army or in irregular formations.

1. *The Background*

During the period between the two World Wars, there were approximately 4,500 Jews in Estonia and they constituted 0.4% of the total population.¹ As far as origin and cultural background, Estonian Jewry was composed of three major elements: the descendants of the "cantonists" and the "soldiers of Nicholas," who had a Russian cultural background; those Jews who came from Kurland

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(western Latvia), who were brought up on German culture; those from Lithuania and eastern Latvia (Latgalia) who had a deeply-rooted Jewish culture. About 3,200 Jews lived in the capital, Tallin, and in the ancient university town of Tartu-Dorpat; about 900 resided in five provincial cities and some 400 in smaller towns and villages. The occupational structure of the community was as follows: 30.4% were traders, 24% officials or employees in public services, 14.8% artisans, 14% laborers, 9.8% professionals, 6.4% owners of real estate and factories, and 0.6 % religious ministrants. Most of the Jews were financially self-sufficient and only a few were dependent on public assistance. Jews were not employed by the government, and there were practically no Jewish officers in the Estonian Army. Nonetheless, the Jews, like other minorities, enjoyed full cultural autonomy from 1926 until Estonia lost its independence in 1940, despite the rise of nationalism and anti-Semitism among the general population and government circles in the late 30's.

Estonian Jewry played an active role in Jewish affairs and participated in the boycott of Nazi Germany, Zionist fund-raising campaigns, etc. The controversies and conflicts within the World Zionist Movement existed in the community, most of whose members supported Zionism. In the absence of a local Jewish newspaper, the Jews of Estonia read the "Estonian supplements" printed by the Lithuanian Jewish dailies, the Zionist *Yidishe Shtime* and the Yiddishist *Folksblat*.

In the wake of the increased activity of the Estonian nationalists,

¹ These figures are from the general census taken by the Estonian Government in 1934. On March 24, 1935 a census of the Jewish population was conducted by the Statistical Commission of the Autonomous Cultural Executive and the Tallin Jewish Community. For a variety of reasons, this census collected data on only 3,944 Jews (89.6% of the total). The figures recorded were summed up in a booklet, "The Jewish Population of Estonia," written by Sh. Gurin, the principal of the Tallin Hebrew secondary school and published in 1936 in Hebrew, Yiddish and Estonian. The statistics in this paper are based on the booklet in question.

who were supported by Nazi Germany, and due to the impact made by the accounts of the refugees from Poland and Germany who reached Estonia in the late 30's, the Jewish community became increasingly apprehensive. Since there was no practical possibility of emigrating, however, there was no exodus of Jews from Estonia. In 1940, when the Baltic republics were annexed by the Soviet Union, Estonian Jewry was almost completely cut off from the Jewish communities in the neighboring countries, due to the travel restrictions instituted by the Soviet authorities.

The process of systematic Sovietization, which was implemented in Estonia from June 1940 until the German invasion, completely eliminated the autonomy enjoyed by the Jews and the other minorities. On the other hand, Jews, especially those of working-class origin or those who had been socialists, were given an opportunity to join the government, military and police.

While nationalization harmed a relatively small segment of the Jewish community, the mass deportations carried out by the Soviet authorities in the middle of June 1941 came as a severe shock. In the course of this operation, which was completed, or suspended, a few days before the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union, the Russians managed to deport tens of thousands of Estonian citizens to the northern Urals and elsewhere in Russia. Among the deportees were approximately 500 Jews² — men, women and children — former factory owners, Zionist Party activists and others classified as "dangerous elements."

2. *Evacuation and Escape with the Assistance of the Army*

Germany attacked the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941 and the Wehrmacht reached Estonia on July 4. The southern defences set up by the Red Army and local volunteer units were disbanded after several days of fighting, and despite counter-attacks launched by the Red Army during July, the Germans continued to advance

² J. Gar, "Baltische Jender," *Allgemeine Enziklopediye*, New York, Vol. 1, p. 395 (hereafter — Gar).

northwards, receiving quite a bit of help along the way from Estonian nationalists, some of whom had been active in the underground against the Soviet regime. The evacuation of Tallin by sea after a three-week siege, in essence marked the completion of the German occupation of Estonia, which took nearly two months. In the course of the bitter fighting, the Russians concentrated on two objectives: (1) conducting a persistent rearguard action with hastily improvised local units, and (2) evacuating men and strategic materials to the Soviet interior. The Jewish population took an active part in both these activities, and many Jews survived due to the latter operation.

According to a decree issued by the Soviet Government on June 24, twenty-five special shock units (*istrebitel'niye batalyoni*) were formed in Estonia to fight as paratroopers and sappers. These troops were under the jurisdiction of the internal and security authorities and the units included, militia men as well as government personnel, Communist Party and Komsomol members, trade unionists and many civilian volunteers. On the average each unit had about two hundred men who were armed with light weapons. While covering the retreat of the armed forces and the evacuation of the population, these units were often forced to fight against Estonian pro-Nazis as well as against the advance columns of the German Army and they sustained very heavy losses. In all, approximately nine thousand men fought in these units,³ among them

³ According to a source based on the archives of the Soviet Defence Ministry, a total of 8,980 men served in these battalions. On July 4, the 17 local battalions had 2,700 men and on July 8, 3,200 men. A. Larin, *Estoniski narod v Velikoy Otechestvennoy voyne*, Akademiya nauk Estonskoy SSR, Tallin, p. 50 (hereafter — Larin). Another Soviet source gives the figure of 10,000 combattants in 27 formations. A.K. Panskeyev (ed.), *Otcherki istorii komuniticheskoy partii Estonii*, III, Tallin, 1970, p. 114 (hereafter — Panskeyev). According to a German source there was a total of 14 battalions in Estonia and Latvia, with each battalion composed of 300 to 400 men. *Ereignismeldung* UdSSR, No. 51, August 25, 1941 (hereafter — *Ereignismeldung*).

at least 120 Jews⁴ (about 1.1 % of the combattants or three times the percentage of Jews in the entire population).

[9000 includes the Soviet Jews, not just pre-war estonian Jews, whose percentage was 0.4%. Mark Rybak].

The Jewish soldiers came from various backgrounds and were especially motivated to fight against the Nazis. Thus, for example, militiaman Gershon Zimbalov, who fought and fell in the ranks of the Tallin battalion, came from a family in Tallin known to be adherents of the Communist Party. Among the others who fell in battle were Josef Myasnikov, a leader of the *Netzach* (Zionist) Movement in Estonia and several veteran Communists, some of whom had fought in the Spanish Civil War, such as Aharon Taub and unit commander Victor Feigin, who held various high positions in the security service during the period of Soviet rule in Estonia. It is particularly noteworthy that entire families, including women, volunteered for service: the women of the Paatz family, Yaakov Pesah and his sister Zelda, the three brothers of the Smolenskin family from Tallin, Avraham ("Ami") and Moshe, both of whom fell in the rearguard fighting in Estonia in 1941, and Reuven, who served as a lieutenant in the Estonian Corps of the Red Army and fell in the fighting for the liberation of Saarame island in late 1944. Most of these soldiers fell in battle or died of their wounds and were buried in mass graves near the battlefields. Indirect references to the high level of their courageous fighting are found in Soviet-

According to the testimony of M. Shar, a Jewish public figure from Tallin, there were at least 120 Jews in the battalions in Estonia (letter of March 5, 1967). A list compiled in Israel based on the testimony of Jews from Estonia, and in particular on the information kindly given to the author by Mr. Yaakov Kaplan of Tel-Aviv (formerly of Tartu), contains the names of eighty Jews and biographical details concerning a number of them. At least sixty of those whose names appear on the list fell in battle. The data on the Jewish combattants in the battalions in this paper is based on the above-mentioned list. On the basis of the interrogation of 260 prisoners of war from the battalions, the German source referred to above states in a daily report that "There are many Jews [in the shock battalions] and of course they play a very important role." *Ereignismeldung*, p. 3.

Estonian historiography,⁵ which generally stresses the bravery of the Estonians.

Tens of Jews fought in the 22nd Estonian Territorial Corps in the course of their regular army service. The Jewish soldiers usually suffered from the anti-Soviet atmosphere in the Corps, and upon the outbreak of the fighting their situation worsened to such an extent that they feared their comrades-in-arms as much as the enemy. Isaac Kahan, who had been wounded in the rearguard fighting in Estonia, was taken to a hospital and handed over by his Estonian comrades to the Germans, who executed him.⁶ A similar fate befell 19 year-old Elhanan Heymann of Tartu and the other Jewish soldiers in an auxiliary unit, which together with its officers deserted and joined the Germans. Those who survived the rearguard battles volunteered for, or were drafted into, the 8th Estonian Corps, which was later established in the framework of the Red Army.

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On June 28, 1941, almost one week after the Germans invaded Russia, the Soviet authorities in Estonia decided to implement the "evacuation of resources and population." A special organization entitled the "Committee of the Republic for Evacuation," headed by A. Raadik, the People's Commissar for Cooperative Economy, was created for this purpose. On July 5, under pressure from the masses of refugees in southern Estonia who followed the Red Army towards the old Soviet borders (via the city of Pskov), the Evacua-

5 *Tartu Komsomol*, Tallin, 1970, pp. 129-130, 140, 146-148 (hereafter — The Komsomol in Tartu). Among the Jewish soldiers who fought and fell on Estonian soil in the ranks of the Latvian Battalion was Benny Luria, aged 24. *Ibid.*, p. 17; see also Larin, p. 85.

6 Testimony of Pivovarov, p. 44. The testimonies cited in the text were recorded by the author for the Oral History Division of the Institute of Contemporary Jewry of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (hereafter — OHD-ICJ).

tion Committee announced that first priority would be given to the experts, engineers and technical staff of factories of strategic and economic importance. Afterwards women, children, invalids, and men over 50⁷ would be evacuated. In fact, the families of high-ranking Party and administration officials — Soviet and Party activists — were also given priority. A special fund was set up to finance the evacuation. The route and means of transportation for the evacuation were planned with the assistance of the 8th Army Command, which had jurisdiction over Estonia. The Army naturally had first priority as far the supply of food, materials and means of transportation and this considerably limited the evacuation of civilians. Moreover, as a result of the relatively speedy advance of the *Wehrmacht*, it was impossible to evacuate several settlements in the south in orderly fashion. At first several routes were used — via the border town of Narva in the direction of Kuybishev, Ulyanovsk, Sizeran and Leningrad, or from Tartu via Lake Peipus in the Pskov direction — but after Tallin was surrounded on August 8 and Narva fell, the civilian evacuation was carried out only by sea. Some of the ships which evacuated people and materials were sunk by the Germans,⁸ but evacuation by sea continued almost until the occupation of Tallin.

Due to the above mentioned circumstances, the evacuation even of those sectors of the population which had priority was limited, and it was very difficult to obtain the "evacuation permit" which was necessary in order to board one of the vessels sailing for Kronstadt or Leningrad. Yet despite the fact that during the initial stages of the evacuation priority was given to the transfer of strategic materials, and in spite of the bombing and the lack of transportation, a relatively large number of people were evacuated from

⁷ Larin, pp. 62-63.

⁸ Only six of the ten ships that left Tallin for Leningrad on August 25, 1941 reached their destination. In all, seventy Estonian and Soviet ships were sunk in the course of the evacuation from Tallin. J.A. Polyakov (ed.), *Eshelony idut na vostok*, Moscow, 1966, pp. 147-148.

Estonia. According to Soviet sources, about 65,000 Estonians,⁹ were evacuated, about half of whom were from Tallin, the last place to fall to the Germans. Evacuation operations were also fairly-successful in Viliandi and Tartu, where there was a relatively large number of Jews. Some Jews stayed behind for personal reasons or due to their ideological convictions, while others remained in Estonia for lack of opportunity to leave. Among those who escaped were many property-owners, Zionists, members of the *Bund* and others who had reason to fear Soviet rule. In some families, there were bitter debates over whether or not to leave, which led to a split in the family. Those who preferred to remain believed that the Germans would do them no harm. These were mostly people who had experienced the German occupation during World War I or had been brought up on German culture. Among them were also opponents of the Soviet regime.¹⁰

On the other hand there were instances in which young people used every possible means to convince their parents to leave with them. A Jew from Tartu, the son of an invalid milliner recounts that his father "was sure the Germans would not harm him,"¹¹ however, in order to keep the family intact he agreed to flee.

"We all left together ... We packed as much as we could, took a wagon, and drove to the railway station where we waited for two days, and on the third day they gave us a railway car, connected it to a military train and we were taken along. It was only one day before the Germans entered Tartu and only a few hours before the bridge was blown up between Petchora and Estonia."

⁹ Larin, p. 97.

¹⁰ A resident of Narva recounts how he tried to persuade a fellow townsman named Greenberg to flee from the Germans. "In spite of all my efforts to convince him, he unfortunately stayed on." Greenberg's argument was: "I understand German, and they won't do me any harm." Testimony of Ben-Haim, OHD-ICJ, p. 8. For a similar case, see the testimony of Druy, *ibid.*, p. 13, and the testimony of Ben-Yosef, *ibid.*, p. 14; testimony of Haltser, *ibid.*, pp. 9-10; testimony of B. Brashinski, *ibid.*, p. 2; testimony of Eidelberg, *ibid.*, p. 7; testimony of Riback, *ibid.*, p. 147.

¹¹ Testimony of Pivovarov, *ibid.*, p. 11.

On the whole, the authorities supplied the means of evacuation only for those with priority, such as Party and government officials, and many Jews were thus obliged to rely on their own resourcefulness and daring in making their escape to the east. The younger son of the Geenisitzki family recounts:¹²

"They did not know exactly when the trains would come . . . One morning my cousin told me that there was a train in the station which would leave in a few hours. I ran home to rush my parents. We had already packed our things in a few suitcases. It was quite a distance from our house to the station so I went to look for a taxi, but it was already impossible to find one. I stopped a bus and asked the driver if he wanted to earn some money by taking us to the railway station . . . He brought me home. I took my parents and the bags and we arrived at the station. The train was still standing there, we went aboard with our belongings . . .".

The Druy family from Tartu, which numbered fifteen individuals, obtained a permit to leave for Soviet Russia via Lake Peipus and on the way came under heavy bombing. One of the daughters recounts:¹³

"Everything was on fire, and we didn't know where to run. Father, an old soldier who had already been through one war, was wearing two suits, one on top of the other, with a short fur jacket on top of the lot [and this in summer, in June!]. . . He had a little money, which he had saved over the previous year. He gave each of his children a few hundred rubles, in case we would be separated, and we hid the money in our belts. We got onto a train which we discovered was going to the front, so we got off and boarded another train . . .".

A former merchant named Kopkin from the small town of Pernau, was called up for emergency labor service upon the outbreak of the war. His wife, who was **left** with three small children, one of them a six weeks' old baby, kept applying to the evacuation committee for an exit permit and was turned down time after time. She did not give up, however, and continued to go from one place

¹² Testimony of Geenie, *ibid.*, p. 20.

¹³ Testimony of Druy, *ibid.*, p. 14.

to another to plead for a permit. Thanks to the intervention of the local authorities she finally received a permit, and managed to leave with her three children on the very last train. Her husband ended up in the Estonian Corps and fought in its ranks until the end of the war.

In at least one place — Viliandi — the authorities actually encouraged the Jews to flee. Alfrida Pick, a veteran Communist who headed the local municipality, "personally went to all the Jews to persuade them to leave,"¹⁴ and as a result at least half of the Jews left for Russia, including old people who previously had not intended to leave.

Although the military authorities were responsible for the evacuation of soldiers, mishaps did occur. Thus for example, a fireman from Pernau, named Furman, who was mobilized at the outbreak of the war to serve in the civilian defence, remained behind and was killed by the Germans. His family was evacuated, but he had been ordered to remain at his post until the last moment.

Shmuel Riback of Tallin served as a driver for one of the members of the Estonian Government. The minister tried to escape to Russia, but was ordered to return to the capital by the Soviet authorities. During the final days of the evacuation, however, he boarded one of the ships sailing for a Soviet port, leaving his driver behind. Riback recalls:

"I was left alone with the car and I didn't know what I was supposed to do. . . I wanted to drive home, because my parents were still in Tallin. I was just beginning to drive off when some Russian sailors came and told me that the Germans were already there. I boarded a small warship — a sort of mine-sweeper along with them and we reached Kronstadt."¹⁵

The head of the German Security Police in Ostland (the Baltic and Byelorussian territories under Nazi occupation) notes in his report of October 12 that approximately half of the 4,500 Jews

¹⁴ Testimony of Eidelberg, *ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁵ Testimony of Riback, *ibid.*, p. 38.

who had previously lived in Estonia had left the country upon the outbreak of the war "thanks to the cooperation of the Soviet institutions." According to his estimate there should have been about 2,000 Jews in Estonia at the time of the occupation.¹⁶ Apparently, he had not taken into account the hundreds of Jews who had been exiled to the Soviet interior before the fighting started.¹⁷

Apart from several exceptions, the majority of the Jews of Estonia who wanted to escape to Soviet Russia managed to do so in time. Altogether about 3,500 Jews fled or were evacuated and deported from Estonia, and about one thousand remained under German occupation.

3. *Exile and Asylum*

In all, some 65,000 Estonian citizens — mostly evacuees, remnants of the Estonian units which had participated in the rearguard battles, and some tens of thousands of deportees reached unoccupied Soviet territory. The Estonian institutions in Soviet Russia — the Central Committee of the Communist Party and especially the Government (with its seat in Chelyabinsk) — maintained contact with the refugees through special representatives who were located in the places where the refugees were concentrated: Chelyabinsk, Ulyanovsk, Kuybishev, Sverdlovsk, Kirov, Gorki, Orenburg-Chkalov, and in the republics of Tataria, Bashkiria, Chuvashia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kirgizia and Tadzhikistan. These representatives, however, did not concern them-

¹⁶ *Ereignismeldung*, No. 111, October 12, 1941. According to the January 31, 1942 report on Estonian Jewry by *Einsatzgruppenfuehrer* E. Stahlecker of *Einsatzgruppen* A, "Most of them escaped with the Red Army; about 2,000 remained where they were, 1,000 of them in Reval (Tallin)." Document PS-2773, Nuremberg Trials.

¹⁷ Regarding the fact that 3,000 Estonian Jews managed to escape, see Gar, p. 398. According to another Jewish source 4,000 Jews succeeded in leaving Estonia before the Nazi occupation. See Ella Amitan Wilensky, "Estonian Jewry — a historical summary, *The Jews in Latvia*," Tel-Aviv, 1971, p. 347. See also the testimonies of Haltser, *ibid.*, p. 13; Pivovarov, *ibid.*, p. 13; Kaplan, *ibid.*, p. 9.

selves with the deportees and prisoners, whom they regarded as "hostile elements."

Like the other deportees, the Jews who had been exiled were classified, as "dangerous social elements" (*sotsialni opasni element*). Most of them were deported to the Soviet interior even before June 22, 1941. The following is the account of one of the Jews deported from Tartu:¹⁸

"At first they took us to Starobyelsk in the Ukraine. The war broke out while we were on our way there, and an order was received to send us to Siberia. We arrived after hardships that defy description. There was no food and no water. They gave out herring but there was no water. . . . We ate the herring with a slice of bread, and they gave us a cup of water a day And this went on for weeks and weeks."

The group reached the Sverdlovsk region in the Northern Urals and were put in a huge labor camp called "Sever Uralsk." Their status was that of prisoners and they were officially classified as *zaklyuchoniye* (imprisoned) or "Z.K." for short. They were employed at various tasks, mostly felling trees and arranging the lumber in piles. The work quota for each prisoner was a tightly packed four square meters. In return each received 600 grams of bread a day and a little hot water. Many died as a result of work accidents, disease, and hunger.

At some point during the first or second year, practically every prisoner was interrogated and "tried" *in absentia*. The sentences were then read to the prisoners who were forced to sign them. Most of the inmates of the camp were sentenced to five years' imprisonment, including the period up to their "trial." There were also instances, however, in which inmates were sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment or even to death, as in the case of Pinhas Katz, the leader of the Revisionist (Zionist) Movement in Estonia.

The wives, children and other relatives of the prisoners were separated from them by enormous distances, and frequently they did not even know the fate of the head of their families. They were

¹⁸ Testimony of Uzhwanski, *ibid.*, p. 17, *passim*.

generally exiled to the Kirov district in the Narim region of Siberia (on the Ob River) or to Novosibirsk. This type of deportation was known as *silka*. At first, the deportees did not have personal identity certificates and they had to report every week, and later every fortnight, to the local office of the NKVD. Their economic situation improved when their status was changed to "free banishment" (*vol'noye poseleniya*). From then on, they were permitted to move freely within a relatively wide area and to engage in all sorts of work. Nonetheless they were forced to commit themselves in writing not to leave the area for 25 years under threat of imprisonment.

Those who were exiled lived under incomparably better conditions than the heads of families who were interned in labor camps. Nevertheless many of the women died of illness or exhaustion, worn out by the strange surroundings, the harsh climate, the struggle to obtain a minimum amount of food, clothing and the other basic necessities for themselves, their children and their elderly parents. The number of deaths among the last group was particularly high. The heads of families who were imprisoned in camps, and even their sons of military age, were not allowed to serve in the army. All efforts to obtain special permission to join the armed forces were in vain.^{18a}

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In the autumn of 1941 a large portion of the Jewish refugees from Estonia were concentrated in areas where there were also non-

^{18a} The son of Moshe Kaplan, a Tartu business man and Zionist leader, was imprisoned in a camp in the northern Urals. He tried to enlist in 1943 and even sent a personal request to Kalinin, Head of the Supreme Soviet. "A reply arrived, but I never received it personally," he recounts, "so I don't know its contents." A year later, however, he was mobilized, but immediately thereafter was rejected (on political grounds). Testimony of Yaakov Kaplan, *ibid.*, p. 4. It appears that several of the deportees nonetheless succeeded in escaping from the place they were sent to and were accepted into the army. See the testimony of Ben-Haim, *ibid.*, pp. 15, 27.

Jewish Estonian refugees (Leningrad, Chelyabinsk, Ulyanovsk, the Chuvashi Republic) as well as in the other places listed above. Nevertheless Jewish refugees from the areas near the western border of the Soviet Union were already beginning to move to the Central Asian republics and towards the southern border of Russia, in the hope that from there it would be easier to get to Eretz-Yisrael. Not a single Estonian Jew succeeded in getting across the border safely. Quite a few were caught and shot, others disappeared without a trace. An Estonian Jew who, together with his elderly parents, got as far as a kolkhoz in the Chuvashi Republic, explains the motives of the Estonian Jews in heading for Central Asia. Among other things he recounts:¹⁹

"We were not badly received. We were told that everyone who wanted to work could do so and earn [a living]. They gave [us] food. I began to work. My parents did not work — they were already too old — my father was then 63 and my mother 55. My father had a brother in Bashkiria, to whom he had been sending parcels for years and they had corresponded as well. My father sent a letter from the Chuvashi kolkhoz to his brother, who invited him to come and join him but warned him frankly that the situation was getting worse from day to day and that there was no certainty of finding lodging, work, etc. My father decided that we should stay in the kolkhoz in the meantime and he went off on his own . . . In the meantime rumors spread that the Germans were rapidly advancing. Then we heard that the Jews in Central Asia were living fairly well, and that it was possible to go from there to Persia and from Persia to here [Eretz-Yisrael]. . . We did not have winter clothing; at the time we had not taken any because we thought we would return in a few months . . . We set out on our way . . . We changed trains a number of times . . . We travelled without tickets: we would give a hundred rubles and they would put us on the train. We travelled by way of the Urals. We passed Novosibirsk, went as far as Barna'ul, and from there travelled south . . . In the Askar Kizel kolkhoz in the Dzhahal-Abad district things were very difficult, we were completely cut off from the rest of the world . . . We worked picking cotton; we used a sickle and had nothing to sharpen it with except

Testimony of Geenie, *ibid.*, pp. 25-27, *passim*. For his army service and his correspondence with his parents, see below notes 30, 31.

stones picked up from the ground . . . The plantations were laid out in parallel rows, each row five kilometers long. And that was the work quota, but I wasn't able to fill it. Our daily ration was two pieces of flat bread ("lipyoskha"), one for me and one for my mother."

Then the son received a draft notice and the mother remained alone. She later went to her husband in Bashkiria, where he had managed to establish himself. He worked at first as an industrial laborer and afterwards was appointed manager of a pharmacy. By this time both his sons were already serving in the Red Army in the Estonian national units. As parents of soldiers he and his wife were entitled to special payments, goods and privileges. Like many others, they supplemented their earnings by cultivating a small garden.

In a similar manner, the family of the milliner from Tartu settled down on a kolkhoz in Kazakhstan.²⁰ The two youngest sons went to school and the oldest one worked on the kolkhoz, while the father continued to practice his craft in the neighboring district center. The sons were called up to the army, and throughout the war their parents corresponded with them. The correspondence was in Yiddish, the language they had spoken at home in Estonia and on the kolkhoz in Kazakhstan.

Despite great hardships and danger some of the Estonian Jewish refugees managed to reach the members of their families who had been deported. In many cases, deportees corresponded with relatives abroad, from whom they received news and parcels.

Several families and individuals from Estonia received help in various forms — grants, scholarships, admission to children's homes — from the institutions of the Estonian government in Chelyabinsk. There were several Jews among the delegates of the Estonian government in the centers where the Estonians were concentrated (e.g. Dr. S. Gens, L. Eisenstatt, and others), and the Estonian administration also employed several Jews (A. Tomarkin, Y. Danziger, and others). They were the first to return to Estonia after the Nazis had been expelled.

²⁰ Testimony of Pivavorov, *ibid.*, pp. 24-25; compare also below note 32.

4. *The 8th Estonian Corps*

On December 18, 1941 the Government Committee for the Defence of the U.S.S.R. (*G.K.O.*) decided to form an Estonian unit within the Red Army. The unit was to be established in the Ural region where there was a very large concentration of Estonians. Dubbed the Estonian 7th Rifle Division, it was formed near Kamishlev in the Sverdlovsk district. A considerable portion of those who founded the unit were survivors of the 22nd Estonian Corps, members of the various shock troop units who had succeeded in escaping via Leningrad and other routes, as well as Estonian citizens already serving in the Red Army. Simultaneously, an additional Estonian Rifle Division (the 249th), was established. From September 25, 1942, these two divisions comprised the Estonian 8th Rifle Corps under the command of Major-General L. Pern and Commissar V. Pusta. The command was composed of Estonians born in the Soviet Union or Soviet citizens of long standing, practically all of them veteran members of the Communist Party. Upon its establishment, the Corps, including reserves, numbered 27,311 men.²¹ Each of the two divisions had about 10,000 men, with the ethnic composition as follows: 88.5% Estonians, 10.2% Russians, and 1.3% other nationalities.²² The language of command and of the various publications was Estonian.

In late 1942 the Corps was brought to the Kalinin front, and it participated in the bitter fighting at Velikye Luki. In the battle that raged from December 9, 1942 to January 23, 1943, the Corps sustained extremely heavy losses and about 75 % of its men were put out of action. After reorganization and the arrival of reinforcements, it was assigned defensive tasks, mainly in the region west of Velikye Luki. From October 1943 on, the Corps took part in the fighting on the second Baltic front. The active service of the Estonian Corps ended in symbolic fashion in a military parade through the outskirts of Tallin on June 17, 1945.

²¹ Larin, p. 135; N.I. Stromberg (ed.), *Bor'ba za Sovyetskuyu Pribaltiku v velikoy otechestvenoy voyne, 1941-1945*, II, Riga, 1966, p. 193.

²² Larin, p. 135. The 1.3 % "others" included the Jewish soldiers.

The first Jews to join the Estonian Division were the survivors of the shock troops. They were joined by Estonian Jews who since the outbreak of the war had been serving in other military formations. A resident of Narva who was drafted upon the outbreak of the war recounts:²³

"I was wounded in the head at Narva and admitted to a hospital. From there I was evacuated together with the hospital to Leningrad. The place was called the Grandyorski Barracks — I can remember it very well — on Volpov Street. Our section was transferred to the Urals. On January 1, 1942 I was taken out of the Russian Division and transferred to the Army office (*voyenkomai*) in Rzhev. From there I was sent to Kamyshlov in the Sverdlovsk district where they were setting up the Estonian Division."

A 20 year-old medical student from Tartu University, who was also recruited at the time of the outbreak of the war, relates:²⁴

"After the fighting started, it was decided to transfer us for training to the city of Kirov (in central Russia). We had not yet been given uniforms. When we went through Pskov, there was a heavy German bombing. We got to Kirov and were billeted in an ancient church. Training went on for about a month and a half... One fine morning we were put in railway cars and transported to the Urals where we were put in labor battalions. The most difficult period was when they disbanded the regular Estonian Corps which was at the front. The soldiers of the Corps were removed from the front and sent to labor battalions. There was dysentery and diptheria, and many died, especially the younger ones. The place was called Wash — a small town in the Urals. We built a huge factory for the extraction of aluminium, and tens of thousands of laborers worked there. Poles, Estonians and Volga-Germans were there. We lived in enormous dirt dug-outs, five hundred men in each. We remained there until February or March 1942. From there we were sent to nearby Kamyshlov near Sverdlovsk, where the 7th Division was founded."

From the scanty official data published about the number of Jews in the Estonian Corps, we learn that on June 11, 1944, at the

²³ Testimony of Ben-Haim, *ibid.*, pp. 10-12, *passim*.

²⁴ Testimony of Eidelberg, *ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

beginning of the campaign for the liberation of Estonia, there were about 200 Jews (0.86% of the total)²⁵ with the following ranks:²⁶

	Officers	Sergeants	Other Ranks	Total
7th Division	12	17	62	91
249th Division	11	9	46	66

To these we must add the staff of the Corps' headquarters, and service and reception center, where there were another 50 Jewish soldiers. The fact that 15% of the Jewish soldiers in the two Estonian Divisions were officers as compared with 7.25% of the Estonians, 10% of the Russians and 8.1% of all personnel can be ascribed to their educational background. One-third to one-half of the Jewish officers were doctors serving in the medical service, some with senior rank: Brigade Doctors Lt.-Col. Zalzmann, Lt.-Col. Dobrushkes, Captain Rohlin, Vet-Surgeon Lt.-Col. Shalem, Capt. Kropatkin, Capt. Shpoongin, Regt. Pharmacist Capt. Feinmann and others. Those with some medical training were given lower ranks in the medical service. Even soldiers without advanced education were trained for medical service, like the sisters Mina and Rivka Feivelson, and Ben-Zion Zimbalov. Some Jewish officers were assigned specific functions: Rappes was a staff officer and interpreter for the 27th Brigade, 27th Division; 1st-Lt. Kaminowski was a political commissar; Capt. Pasternak was a quartermaster. Combat soldiers also received promotions, mostly those who had served in the Estonian Army, like Shmuel Kaplan, a former member of *Betar* (Zionist Revisionist movement), who in 1938, at

²⁵ Larin, p. 285 (his figures are based on the archives of the Soviet Ministry of Defence).

²⁶ *Eesti Rahvas Suures Isamaa Sojast* (I), Tallin, 1971, p. 287 (Data according to 15.5.1942).

the age of 19, had already attained the rank of sergeant. He took courses while in the Estonian Corps and after being promoted to the rank of lieutenant commanded an engineers' combat company. He received the Red Star decoration for his outstanding war record. Capt. Aba Feinmann commanded an artillery unit, and 1st Lt. Koppel Svitzki commanded an infantry company. On the whole, those chosen as commanders were individuals whose political and social record was spotless, such as Goldmann, the former chimney-sweep, or the young Bann, who rose from the rank of private to lieutenant, etc. Thus a candidate for a course for artillery officers was rejected because he wrote in his questionnaire that his father had owned a pharmacy and that he had a brother in Eretz Yisrael.²⁷

From mid-1943 on and especially in 1944, Jewish soldiers were released from the Estonian Corps, upon the recommendation of the Estonian government institutions, in order to be trained for government service in post-war Estonia. Thus for example, one of the soldiers was allowed to complete his medical studies in Moscow, and was later appointed a medical supervisor in liberated Estonia.

There were no Jews among the higher ranks of the Estonian Corps, nor among the recipients of the highest decorations — Hero of the Soviet Union, Order of Lenin, etc. Jews did, however, receive lower combat decorations: "the Red Flag", "the Red Star," etc. — as well as medals for "bravery" and "combat virtues." The names of some who were mentioned favorably in the Soviet press and history books are: Lt. Sh. Kaplan (mentioned above), Capt. Yitzhak Sherman, machine-gunner M. Goldberg, Haim and Berl Shor, and others.²⁸

Tens of Jewish soldiers fell in battle, among them some who had remained in Estonia under the German occupation, or who were parachuted in to organize partisan warfare. One of the latter, Zilla Zimbalov, a 17 year old member of the Komsomol, was parachuted

²⁷ Testimony of Geenie, *ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

²⁸ For data on Goldberg, see Larin, p. 307; for H. and B. Shor, see *Einikeit*, October 7, 1943, p. 2.

into the Valka area in southern Estonia. Estonian nationalists handed her over to the Germans, who tortured and killed her. Zilla's brother had fallen in the rearguard fighting in late 1941.²⁹ Among the Jews known to have fought with the partisans in Estonia were Shpoongin, Gringut, Blehman, Kogan and others.

The Jews who fought in the 8th Corps were mostly from Tallin, Tartu and Narva, and most of them were of the same age, and from the same school or social group. Quite a few of the soldiers were related to each other. Five members of the Uzhwanski-Geenisitski family from Tartu served in the Corps, and three of them fell in battle. The Jewish soldiers were scattered throughout the Corps. "I haven't seen Shimon for over three years " wrote one of the two Geenisitski brothers³⁰ to his parents in September 1944:

" .. Since each of us was serving in a different place we could never see one another. For example, I never saw my brother even though we were not stationed far apart. He was in a unit only 7 kilometers from me. I would ask my CO. for permission to visit him and he would put me off from one day to the next. When I was finally given permission, I couldn't find my brother. I was told that that very day at 2 o'clock they had been moved somewhere else. Another time, it was 1944 already, I heard that his entire regiment was marching along the road. I stood by the road for about two hours. The regiment marched past, but I didn't see him. He fell in October 1944."³¹

Only rarely did members of the same family succeed in serving together as did the two Pivovarov brothers, Abba and Yaakov-Moshe, who were in the 921st Regiment of the 249th Division (until one of them was sent to the Saarame front on the Baltic Sea and fell in battle). His brother recounted:³²

²⁹ Y. Rodinov, "Twenty-five years since the liberation of Latvia from the Nazis," in the *Folksshtime* (Paris), October 18, 1969, p. 2.

³⁰ Letter of the soldier Misha Geenisitzki (related to the Uzhwanski family), dated September 6, 1944, to his parents in Bashkiria. A photograph of the letter is annexed to the testimony Geenie, *ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

³² Testimony of Pivovarov, *ibid.*, pp. 24–25.

"When several months passed and I had not received any letters from him, I went to an Estonian comrade whose brother was a company commander there, and I asked him to write to his brother. Some weeks later I received the bad news that my brother had fallen."

The isolation and the harsh living conditions intensified the desire of the Jewish soldiers to foster and preserve the ties among themselves, especially among those who had known each other previously. When a young Jewish soldier from Tartu, a former member of the Jewish Students' Union "Limuvia" first joined the 27th Brigade of the 7th Division, he met another member of the Student's Union, who was a staff officer in the same unit. The latter was able to inform him that his parents, from whom he had not heard since the outbreak of the war, were alive and living in the Caucasus.

The two Pivovarov brothers made friends with a fellow townsman, Sgt. Benjamin Druy. They would visit each other to chat in Yiddish and Estonian, but mainly in Yiddish. The men often suffered not only from isolation but also from a lack of food and proper equipment. "What little bread we received was soggy and we would gobble it up at once, so that we had to eat the soup, which was distributed about a quarter of an hour later, without bread." They would exchange their vodka ration for bread. From time to time they would all go and visit their former schoolmate, the officer Koppel Svitzki. "In our hearts we were full of hope that he would help us ...".

The Jewish officers could not always help the privates even though some of them were old acquaintances and friends. Nonetheless, they did have a feeling of solidarity with them. Thus, for example, all the Jewish soldiers would feel uncomfortable if a Jewish officer was caught doing something wrong and was severely punished. On the other hand, they were inspired by the relatively large number of Jewish officers and by the decorations which Jewish soldiers won for bravery. "We were simply glad when one of ours got a promotion," says a Jewish corporal, in whose whole battalion there were only 25 Jews, "and when we saw that some of

ours were among the officers whose opinion counted."³³ A Jewish soldier who crossed the Estonian border together with his unit wrote to his parents that he was excited about the battles and being near home, and proudly added that the Jewish officer Shpoongin "was decorated for his bravery during the conquest of Nevel and was promoted to the rank of major."³⁴

Jewish soldiers, and especially the officers among them, did their best to help their families in the hinterland, by sending them money or parcels, particularly towards the end of the war when the supply situation had improved.

With the exception of a few isolated incidents, Jewish soldiers were not punished by the security institutions for "past sins" (social origin, political affiliation, activities that could be interpreted as anti-Soviet, etc.). Their testimony gives the impression that their position in the army was good. As far as the Estonian soldiers are concerned, those who had been citizens of independent Estonia "were not anti-Semitic"³⁵ This, however, was not true of the Estonians who were citizens of the U.S.S.R. Those raised under the Soviet regime were far more anti-Semitic than the others, and the problems involved in relations with them were "much more difficult."

5. *The Return to Liberated Estonia (1944-1945)*

As soon as the first Red Army columns entered southeastern Estonia in August 1944, members of the Central Committee of the Estonian Communist Party and of the Estonian Government who had previously been trained in unoccupied Soviet Russia reached the Estonian town of Vyru. The Party and State institutions were steadily reinforced by men released from the Corps specifically for this purpose with the consent of the front-line commanders. The

³³ Testimony of Ben-Haim, *ibid.*, p. 32.

³⁴ Letter of the soldier Misha Geenisitzki to his parents, dated August 7, 1944.

³⁵ Testimony of Glaser, OHD-ICJ, p. 13; cf. testimonies of Pivovarov, *ibid.*, pp. 30-39; Geenie, *ibid.*, pp. 37-38; Ben-Hayim, *ibid.*, p. 23.

reorganization of the Estonian civilian administration and the Party machine progressed as the Germans retreated westwards.

Despite the ceremonial convening of the Central Plenum of the Communist Party and the opening of the Third Session of the Estonian Supreme Soviet, the process of renewed Sovietization was at first very slow and disorganized. The main reasons for this were the indifference bordering on hostility of the local population and the acute shortage of party activists and reliable personnel. The soldiers discharged from the Estonian Corps and the evacuees who had returned from the Soviet Union were therefore in great demand by the civilian authorities and party institutions in 1944 and 1945 and even afterwards.

Among the civilians and soldiers who returned to Estonia were the remnants of the 3,000 Jews who fled or were evacuated to the Soviet interior in the summer of 1941. The rest fell in battle, were killed in the bombings or died from hunger and other causes. At this stage very few, if any, of the 500 deportees and the members of their families were permitted to return to Estonia.

Until they entered Estonia on the heels of the retreating Germans, the Jewish soldiers were not aware of the dimensions of the Holocaust. They eventually learned of the active role played by local Estonians in the murder of Jews and the pillage of Jewish property but they were unable to take revenge. When a Jewish soldier found out that an Estonian had killed Jews or handed them over to the Nazis, he would notify the authorities, who would then interrogate the suspect and search for other witnesses. "We were not relieved as a result of this, but at least we had the feeling that something was being done," recounts one of the soldiers.³⁶

Theoretically all those evacuated from Estonia were given an opportunity to return to their homes as early as 1944, but in fact repatriation was limited and special permits were needed. Even after obtaining permits, the evacuees had to be quarantined and go through various procedures.

³⁶ Testimony of Pivovarov, *ibid.*, p. 32.

A resident of Tallin relates:³⁷ "I had the feeling I was treading on corpses. When I went through the town for the first time it was terrible, a most terrible feeling." The refugees returned to their former homes, looked for their property, tried to re-establish their businesses, and arrange tombstones for the dead. In certain communities, such as Tartu and Felin, as many as one-third to one-half of the former residents returned during the initial period. In Tartu, the synagogue had been destroyed so a *minyan* (quorum of ten necessary to conduct public prayers) was held in private homes. From a financial point of view the situation was fairly good and the authorities in charge of rehabilitating the refugees as well as their former neighbors adopted a relatively positive attitude towards the Jews. Yet, in the smaller places the Jews had a growing feeling of loneliness and isolation. A discharged soldier recounts: "When the fellows came back to Tartu and we sat down together to figure out who had perished and who had survived — our hair stood on end. Only three or four of us had survived — there was no one left to talk to."³⁸

The Jews who returned to Estonia tended to stay in Tallin, particularly during the late '40's, when a large number of evacuees were allowed back. However, the majority of the approximately 5,000 Jews living in Estonia today came from other parts of the Soviet Union.³⁹ In the early '50's there were, apparently, no more than a thousand Jews in Estonia who had lived there before World War II. During those years many Jews were punished for pre-war "transgressions" and there were even cases in which Jews who had

³⁷ Testimony of Ida Shapiro, *ibid.*, p. 11.

³⁸ Testimony of Pivovarov, *ibid.*, pp. 40-41.

³⁹ According to the census conducted in the U.S.S.R. in 1959, there were 5,436 Jews in Estonia (0.5% of the population), 3,714 of whom (68.3%) lived in Tallin. Twenty percent of the Jews of Estonia listed Yiddish as their native language (as compared with 68% in Lithuania, 48.6% in Latvia and 50.5% in Moldavia). These figures are taken from the census results (16 volumes): *Itogi vsesoyuznoy perezpisi naseleniya*, 1959, published by Gosizdat, Moskva, 1962-1963.

been exiled in 1941, were deported a second time. During this period several Jews were given posts in the civil administration and in the internal security institutions (Idel Jakobson, M. Shor, L. Eisenstatt, Shmotkin, Markovitch and others). It was not until the '60's that some of those who had been banished, deported or imprisoned in the past, were granted rehabilitation and had their civil and professional rights restored. Some even received permission to leave Estonia and emigrate to Israel.

This last fact emphasizes the paradoxical implications of the deportation of the Jewish population by the Soviets prior to the Nazi occupation. An event which at the time was considered a disaster became, at least for some, a factor which helped in their eventual rescue. As far as the rescue of Jews is concerned, the evacuation produced effective results despite the fact that it was an outgrowth of an inflexible policy based on objective considerations, in which humanitarian motives were of marginal significance.

The percentage of Estonian Jews evacuated — at least 50 % — was the highest in all the East European countries under Nazi occupation. The percentage of Jews evacuated from the two neighboring countries was lower: only 6 % of the Jews of Lithuania were evacuated and 15% of the Jews of Latvia. It should not be forgotten, however, that Lithuania was conquered in three days and Latvia in two weeks, whereas it took the Germans nearly two months to occupy Estonia. We may therefore conclude that the ratio of evacuees was a function of the time factor, among others. Thus the Jews in Estonia were also able to participate in the rear-guard actions in numbers far greater than their proportion of the general population.

The uniqueness of the fate of Estonian Jewry lies not only in the proportion of those who were rescued but also in their motivation to fight, and the effective results of their combat both in the army and irregular formations.